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Up in the Air

Hot Debate on the Fate Of Midgetman Missile Shapes Up in Congress

Star Wars Could Derail Plans For Truck-Borne Device; Gore vs. Wilson Factions

Pursuing the 'Midgetmanski'

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WASHINGTON—A new battle is shaping up in Congress in the decade-long struggle over how to modernize the nation's land-based strategic missile force.

At issue is the fate of the Midgetman missile. The Midgetman and its launcher are small enough to be hauled about by an oversize truck and trailer. But the stakes are large, and the battle promises to be Gargantuan in terms of the money and strategic commitments involved. "This could be Godzilla versus Rodan," says a Senate aide preparing for the debates in Congress in coming months.

On one side is Sen. Albert Gore, the leader of a moderate-liberal coalition promoting a new approach to nuclear-arms control built around the Midgetman. On the other side is Sen. Pete Wilson, the leader of a more-conservative group that has increasing doubts about the $45 billion Midgetman program.

Pro and Con

Sen. Gore, a Tennessee Democrat, is pushing a carefully engineered 1983 White House compromise featuring the Midgetman as a way to "stabilize" the arms race. Republican Sen. Wilson of California prefers to delay work on the new missile while pouring Pentagon money into President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, known as Star Wars. Such a pause almost certainly would make the Midgetman a candidate for the scrap heap under the Gramm-Rudman deficit-reduction law.

Most decisions on nuclear weapons are made without much spectacle. Lately, the Navy's $100 billion program for the awesomely powerful Trident submarine and missile has been sailing through Congress, producing only minor political ripples.

But the politics of land-based missiles are different, and the coming battles over the Midgetman are symptomatic of the growing credibility gap between U.S. rhetoric and real efforts to match or counter Soviet moves.

Since the late 1950s, the U.S. has maintained redundant systems for delivering long-range nuclear weapons. The so-called strategic triad—bombers and cruise missiles that fly through the atmosphere, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and land-based ICBMs—is designed to guarantee that at least one part of the nuclear arsenal survives an attack.

Vulnerability of ICBMs

Land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles can be launched quickly and deliver highly accurate warheads on target in less than 30 minutes. But America's ICBMs, currently deployed in stationary underground silos, also are vulnerable to enemy attack. Plans to move ICBMs around so they will be harder to find and destroy have generated so much political controversy that some Pentagon officials are talking privately about finessing the whole issue of mobile missiles until Mr. Reagan's strategic defense program yields some new way of protecting missile silos.

Both the Midgetman and its larger cousin, the MX, are mobile missiles. Both also are approaching the peak of their financing demands, making them extremely vulnerable to large cuts that could be imposed under Gramm-Rudman. The budget law will force competition between them and other strategic programs, including the Stealth Bomber, the Navy's new Trident II D-5 missile and the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Another problem is the "snigger factor," a term coined by House Armed Services Committee Chairman Les Aspin to describe the public cynicism following repeated failures to find a consensus for how to deploy a mobile missile.

It began in the late 1970s, when the Carter administration unveiled a scheme to move MX missiles among shelters around a "racetrack" so the enemy couldn't find them. That was followed by "dense pack," a plan to group the missiles closely together in silos, relying on "fratricide," or the tendency of incoming enemy missiles to destroy one another.

"Let's face it, the man on the street is confused," says Rep. Aspin, a Wisconsin Democrat.

Midgetman, officially known to the Air Force as "the small ICBM," emerged in 1981 in an effort to end the confusion. Jan M. Lodal, a young engineer who had been Henry A. Kissinger's nuclear-weapons expert on the National Security Council, presented the concept in an article on the oped page of the New York Times.

Mr. Lodal envisioned a small missile. His strategy was to put only one nuclear warhead on it, compared with 10 on the MX missile. The size and the power of the MX missile, he reasoned, only encouraged the Russians to find a way to hit it. He considered it better to scatter a large number of smaller, single-warhead missiles in silos, presenting the Russians with so many targets that they wouldn't have enough warheads to destroy them all and still mount a major attack.

What Mr. Lodal was trying to do, he recalls, was "change the rules of the game without negotiating." The move would stabilize the arms race by prodding the Russians to respond with a small missile of their own, and it would simplify arms control by encouraging negotiators to begin thinking about limiting warheads and not launchers.

"The new missiles themselves could be quite simple and relatively inexpensive," wrote Mr. Lodal, who now heads a computer company in suburban Washington. The idea, in fact, had been batted around behind closed doors in Washington for years, but the Air Force and the Pentagon always wound up rejecting it.

Shift in Emphasis

But in the months after the Lodal article appeared, the idea took root in Congress, which was coming under heavy political fire from the nuclear-freeze movement. Sen. Gore, then a member of the House, developed a new arms-control proposal that envisioned both the U.S. and the Soviet Union replacing their current multiwarheaded ICBM forces with the type of missile Mr. Lodal proposed.

Rep. Aspin of Wisconsin decided that the Lodal idea needed an added gimmick, something that "would give the average guy the idea he was getting something more for his money." He sold the idea that the Midgetman shouldn't be placed in underground silos but mounted on a mobile launcher, giving it more protection from increasingly accurate Soviet missiles.

The proposal for a mobile Midgetman drew increasing support from moderates in both parties, and in 1983 it became the centerpiece of a compromise forged by the President's Commission on Strategic Forces, led by retired Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft.

The compromise is credited with saving the political life of the MX missile. The Carter administration had tried to get 200 of the 190,000-pound MX missiles on mobile launchers. The commission opted for only 100 MX's, deciding to place them in silos. Then it called for the rapid development of the Midgetman, to lead to deployment by the early 1990s. The White House and Congress bought the compromise, altering budget priorities to build 500 of the new missiles and even legislating the weight of the Midgetman to be no more than 33,000 pounds, so the Air Force couldn't increase its size. Major contractors for the Midget-

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man, as for the MX, are Boeing Co. and Martin Marietta Corp.

The contortions of the U.S. planners hadn't gone unnoticed in the Soviet Union, where U.S. intelligence noted work on a new land-based mobile intercontinental ballistic missile that Americans began to call "Midgetmanski."

As they studied the Midgetman, Air Force planners found that the program had to differ from the Soviet version. Soviet mobile missiles can be dispersed over large areas of central Siberia, while U.S. analysts feared "public interface problems" unless U.S. mobile missiles remained on military bases in the West or the Midwest.

That left the more confined U.S. missiles vulnerable to a "barrage attack" by large numbers of enemy missiles falling in an even pattern, an attack that could create cyclonic winds that would flip over or destroy normal vehicles. To forestall this, the Air Force came up with a Midgetman launcher that has a streamlined trailer pulled by something that resembles an armored Ferrari.

Under the threat of attack, the launchers would disperse over a wide area and then hunker down on the ground, using special claws to dig their armored skirts into the roadway so the blast forces are directed over them.

All of this drove the cost of the Midgetman to around $90 million per warhead, much higher than any other U.S. land-based missile in history. Mr. Lodal says he knew the Midgetman was in trouble when Sen. Wilson began raising the cost issue on the Senate floor.

The Star Wars Plan

Sen. Wilson's doubts about the Midgetman began with his staunch support of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, an effort announced in 1983 to create a "space shield" against nuclear weapons. If the Soviets responded with a similar program, Sen. Wilson discovered, the Midgetman might not be able to penetrate Soviet missile defenses.

To increase the missile's effectiveness while decreasing the cost per warhead, Sen. Wilson suggests redesigning the Midgetman to carry three warheads. The missile, he says, "has got to be affordable." He adds, "In the 1988 budget you're going to have a real competition, not just between defense programs but between strategic programs. Which one will you slip or indefinitely defer?"

Sen. Wilson's candidate for slippage is Midgetman, which he has begun calling "Congressman" because of its legislated requirements. Moreover, he says the compromise that produced the Midgetman was shattered in August 1985, when Congress decided to cut MX deployment to 50 from 100. Sen. Wilson blames Rep. Aspin and House Democrats for the failure.

Rep. Aspin argues that the coalition behind the Midgetman is still alive. "The Democrats need this missile," he says, asserting that moderates in both parties, but particularly Democrats, need to find defense programs they can support.

Deployment Outlook

The military has exacerbated the Midgetman's financing problems by declaring the SDI immune from Gramm-Rudman cuts. While the Air Force says it can still field the Midgetman by 1992, its No. 1 "strategic modernization priority" is getting money for another 50 MX missiles, according to Brig. Gen. Charles A. May Jr., an Air Force official in charge of monitoring the political progress of both the MX and Midgetman. An Air Force decision on whether to deploy Midgetman on schedule, Gen. May says, isn't expected until late in the fall.

Midgetman analysts note that U.S. views on mobile missiles have flip-flopped at least four times in the last 30 years. In the late 1950s some ICBMs were designed to be carried on the U.S. railroad system, an idea that was later rejected.

U.S. enthusiasm for mobiles waxed anew in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, then it waned last October when U.S. negotiators suddenly told the Soviets at the Geneva arms-control talks that mobile missiles should be banned because their numbers are difficult to verify.

Gen. Scowcroft, now vice chairman of a consulting firm, says that was an ominous sign because Congress might conclude that "the administration is losing interest in the small missile and so therefore why not drop it?"

One of the immediate concerns of U.S. arms-control negotiators is Midgetmanski, now officially known as the SS-25, which was deployed by the Soviets earlier this year. (The Soviet version of the MX, the SS-24, also was deployed. It reportedly is being carried on parts of the Soviet rail system and its launcher looks like a boxcar.)

"It seems to me that in all of these areas, if I was a Russian negotiator, I wouldn't rush to the bargaining table," says Gen. Scowcroft. "We're doing so many things to ourselves, it would be interesting for them (the Russians) to simply sit back and see what else we can do."

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